Bizarre Bijoux: Surrealism in Jewelry

By Toni Greenbaum

Marcel Duchamp, in a 1921 letter to Tristan Tzara, proposed that the characters dada be cast, strung on a chain, and sold to raise money for the dada movement. “The insignia,” he wrote, “would protect against certain diseases, against numerous annoyances of life...something like those Little Pink Pills which cure everything...a universal panacea, a fetish in this sense.” Indeed, Duchamp was astute in perceiving jewelry to be objects of power—with magical as well as artistic connotations. And few styles of jewelry had as much visual, psychological, emotional, and spiritual impact as those inspired by surrealism. Although much jewelry from the first half of the twentieth century was consistent with a variety of esthetic dictums, such as symbolism, cubism, and constructivism, that which employed surrealism as its muse was certainly among the most compelling. Surrealist jewelry was an international phenomenon, the genesis of the style occurring within the European community in the 1920s, not long after the drafting of the first Manifesto of Surrealism in 1924. The mode flourished there in the 1930s, although the United States possessed the most adherents in the 1940s and 1950s.

In addition to its obvious foundation in the surrealist canon, surrealist jewelry was formidably influenced by art nouveau. The mannerisms seen in the designs of René Lalique and Eugène Grasset in France; Wilhelm Lucas von Cranach, Erich Erler, and Ludwig Habich in Germany; Philippe Wolfers in Belgium; Koloman Moser and Rudolph Kalvich in Austria; Herbert McNair in Scotland; and Sir Alfred Gilbert and George Hunt in England were modulated by surrealist jewelers. Art nouveau’s precepts of nightmarish imagery, decayed life forms, and organic whiplash curves were virtually endemic to surrealism as well. Around 1917, artist Augusto Giacometti, Alberto Giacometti’s uncle, arrived independently at an abstraction that anticipated the “informal,” or, in surrealist terminology, the “automatic.” But his method had its roots in art nouveau instead of the then prevalent cubist morphology. Jean Arp, the father of biomorphism, whose earlier protosurrealist style subscribed to the rectilinear structuring of cubism, ultimately acceded to the new curvilinearity that was born of art nouveau. His mature shapes, derived from nature, consisted of closed, flat, amorphous forms with botanical and/or anthropomorphic associations. Later, in the 1930s, at a time when it was not fashionable in...
Toni Greenbaum (aka Toni arcel Duchamp, in a 1921 letter to Tristan Tzara, proposed that the characters dada be cast, strung on a chain, and sold to raise money for the dada movement. "The insignia," he wrote, "would protect against certain diseases, against numerous annoyances of life...some-Design and lectures at New York University. An author and objects of power—with magical as well as artistic connotations. And few styles of jewelry had as much visual, psychological, emotional, and spiritual impact as those inspired by surrealism. Although much jewelry from the first half of the twentieth century was consistent with a variety of esthetic dictums, such as symbolism, cubism, and constructivism, that which employed surrealism as its American Jewelry: Sources muse was certainly among the most compelling. Surrealist jewelry was an inter-portion of Design 1935-1965: was formidably influenced by art nouveau. The mannerisms seen in the designs of Rene Lalique and Eugene Grasset in France; Wilhelm Lucas von Cranach, Erich Erler, and Ludwig Habich in Germany; Philippe Wolfers in Belgium; Koloman Moser and Rudolph Kalvich in Austria; Herbert McNair in Scotland; and Sir Alfred Gilbert and George Hunt in England were modulated by surrealist jewelers. Art nouveau's precepts of nightmarish imagery, decayed life forms, and organic whiplash curves were virtually endemic to sur-realism as well. Around 1917, artist Augusto Giacometti, Alberto Giacometti's uncle, arrived independently at an abstraction that anticipated the "informal," or, in surrealist terminology, the "automatic." But his method had its roots in art nouveau instead of the then prevalent cubist morphology. Jean Arp, the father of biomorphism, whose earlier protosurrealist style subscribed to the rectilinear structuring of cubism, ultimately acceded to the new curvilinearity that was born of art nouveau. His mature shapes, derived from nature, con-sisted of closed, flat, amorphous forms with botanical and/or anthropomor-phic associations. Later, in the 1930s, at a time when it was not fashionable in...
avant-garde circles, Salvador Dali admired art nouveau. His paintings incorporated such art nouveau conventions as arabesques and surface incrustations.4

Basically, there are three types of surrealism: 1) academic illusionism—that which has its roots in the spatial theater of protosurrealist Georgio de Chirico, consisting of trompe l’oeil and/or doll-like images displaced in dreamlike settings or fantastic circumstances; 2) abstract surrealism or biomorphism, which used amorphous shapes reminiscent of unicellular organisms or phantasmagorical creatures; and 3) the surrealist object—a “readymade” or astonishing combination of found objects that is elevated by attribution to art status. Illusionistic surrealism is typified by Dalí, Yves Tanquy, and René Magritte; biomorphism by Arp and Joan Miró; and the surrealist object by Duchamp, Man Ray, and Meret Oppenheim. Jewelers have sought inspiration in all three kinds.

Dali’s designs for jewelry (ca. 1948–1960) consisted of images extrapolated from his own paintings.5 For example, The Persistence of Memory brooch (1948–1949), which was fabricated from gold, diamonds, and black enamel, is in fact a three-dimensional replica in precious materials of a melted watch in the 1931 picture of the same name. Ironically, arising from an accessory of dress, the limp watch is returned by a perverse twist to the realm of jewelry.6 Tanquy also designed jewelry that borrowed motifs from his own paintings. His rings, originally carved by him in rosewood (ca. 1937) and later cast in gold (ca. 1960), recall the rocklike monoliths that populate his surreal landscapes. In addition to the jewelry of Dalí and Tanquy, examples of illusionistic surrealism in jewelry exist from as early as the 1920s. One is a silver, copper, and enamel pendant by Pforzheim jeweler Kurt Baer, depicting an attenuated female personage (perhaps a goddess or the Virgin Mary) in a templelike garden structure with a potted plant diagonally behind her.7 Baer’s mannequin, exaggerated perspective, distorted architectural space, and inverted scale smack of de Chirico. Furthermore, this piece conforms to other contemporaneous works, since illusionistic surrealism was not uncommon in Germany at the time. Consider the paintings of Richard Oelze, the graphic art of Bauhaus typographer Herbert Bayer, and the photocollages of the Berlin dada group (John Heartfield, Richard Huelsenbeck, Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, et al.).

Biomorphism had considerable representation in Germany also, for example in the paintings of Willi Baumeister and the jewelry of Richard Haizmann. The latter, as early as 1928, displayed a precocious biomorphism in his silver and copper brooches.8 Haizmann, a sculptor, painter, graphic artist, and ceramicist as well as a jewelry designer, worked in Hamburg in the 1920s. After being

4. Ibid., 113.
5. About 1948 Eric Ertman, a Finnish shipping magnate, commissioned Dali to design a collection of jewelry to be manufactured and distributed by the firm of Alemany & Ertman, New York. Carlos Alemany, Ertman’s partner in the venture, was an Argentine diamond merchant. The pieces were probably fabricated by New York jeweler Varian Deverne. A group of twenty-one examples from this collection was exhibited throughout Italy, Spain, and France in 1953 via the Catherwood Foundation, who wished to show excellence in American design. In 1958 an expanded collection was purchased by the Owen Cheatham Foundation, who rented it to various museums and other institutions to raise money for its educational and religious projects. A group associated with the Terrot Moore Museum in Cadaqués, Spain, bought the collection in 1981, and in 1987 the jewelry was sold to a foundation in Japan.
released from wartime imprisonment by the French, he briefly ran an art
gallery where he became acquainted with Emil Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,
Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. In 1924 Haizmann began working as an
artist, in a style reminiscent of prehistoric cave paintings. He was a spiritualist
who, like primitive man, ascribed an invisible existence to all visible phenom-
ena, believing the unseen world to be the real one.\(^9\) Haizmann sought to create
as a child might, in a naive manner, that is, from the unconscious mind. This
method links him to automatic writing, one of the major tenets of surrealism.
Haizmann, along with certain other German jewelers, possibly Walter Giesübel
(in Gablonz, ca. 1930) and Erwin Mürle (in Pforzheim, ca. 1925), wished to pro-
vide an alternative to prevailing conventional jewelry styles.\(^10\) Haizmann's silver
brooch from 1928 consists of an amorphous silhouette that suggests an animal
fetus.\(^11\) It was fabricated by craftsman Albert Kahlbrandt. A few more pieces are
extant; and Haizmann may have designed additional jewelry, but most of his
work was ultimately lost or destroyed by the Nazis. As a matter of fact, he was
one of the artists denigrated in the Entartete Kunst exhibition of 1937.\(^12\)

Although Naum Slutsky is identified with hard-edge, geometric abstraction
associated with 1920s industrial modernism, we see smatterings of biomor-
phism in several pieces he designed around 1932. At that time he lived in
Hamburg and became familiar with Richard Haizmann through their mutual
connection with Der Block.\(^13\) It is not surprising that Slutsky would develop
some manifestations of biomorphism since he was exposed early on to
Moser's \textit{Jugendstil} designs at the Wiener Werkstätte, which he joined in 1912.
Moreover, Slutsky went on to head the metal shop at the Wiemar Bauhaus
from 1922–1924, where he saw daily the variegated, Arp-like tables at which
the metalsmiths worked.\(^14\) His silver-plated chrome and orange glass pendant
from 1932, although rigidly square, betrays a strong undulating element. The
orange square is overlaid with a silver sheet that is pierced with holes and ter-
minates about two-thirds of the way down in a curvilinear profile. Slutsky emi-
gated to England in 1933, but his influence in those transitional years—
along with that of Haizmann and the Hamburg circle—is readily apparent.

Denmark was at first reluctant to regard biomorphism with enthusiasm. Its
particular watered-down version harked back to a vernacular \textit{art nouveau},
namely the botanical adumbrations of Andreas Hansen, Thorvald Bindesbøll,
Mogens Ballin, and Georg Jensen. In 1940 architects Tøve and Edvard Kindt-
Larsen tried to introduce the principles of painting and sculpture to jewelry.
They designed a clasp and three brooches reminiscent of the simple organic
cutouts seen in Erik Magnussen's silver belt clasp from 1901. But the shapes
were additionally reflective of the whimsical biomorphs inhabiting the
paintings of Miró. These designs by the Kindt-Larsens were never produced.

\(^10\) For examples of jewelry by Giesübel and Mürle, see Weber, \textit{Schmuck}, 184, pl. 233, and 266,
pl. 522.
\(^11\) For an illustration of Haizmann's brooch, see Barbara Cartlidge, \textit{Twentieth Century Jewelry} (New
York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 54, pl. 64.
\(^12\) Entartete Kunst (Degenerate art) opened in Munich on 19 July 1937. It consisted of over 650
works by Germany's leading avant-garde artists. (Sixteen thousand works in all were stripped from
the nation's museums.) Ridiculed as vulgar products of the Jewish-Bolshevist Weimar Republic,
they traveled throughout cities in Germany and Austria for four years.
\(^13\) Der Block consisted of a group of Hamburg artists who rejected distinctions between the fine and
applied arts and crafts, instead regarding art as a holistic unity.
\(^14\) Eidelberg, "Biomorphic Modern," 89.
however, because the A. Michelsen company, for whom they worked, considered their radically asymmetrical cloudlike forms too modern for serial production. What the concern did manufacture by the couple was a silver and enamel necklace consisting of overlapping “hearts.” Really a token attempt at biomorphism, this submission to A. Michelsen’s centenary competition was considered safe commercial design at the time.

Not until the end of the Second World War did Danish design embrace biomorphic abstraction. Henning Koppel, an academy-trained sculptor, began working for Georg Jensen in 1945, after returning to Denmark from sanctuary in Sweden. Koppel’s mastery of form and exploitation of silver’s potential were not simply an expansion of the Kindt-Larsens’ playful designs but were, in fact, a real merging of jewelry and sculpture. The silver links of his bracelet from 1947 (fig. 3) appear to grow organically from one another and create a continuous, undulating whole around a complexly contoured surface. This was the first time, incidentally, that the separate dynamic elements of a bracelet (or necklace) were not connected solely by rings or hinges. Thus the piece presented an extraordinary innovation in jewelry design in general, as well as being a remarkable example of biomorphism in particular.

Catalan painter and goldsmith Manuel Capdevila preceded Henning Koppel by a decade. Capdevila worked in Barcelona, an enlightened city, receptive to the conventions of biomorphism probably due to the following factors: familiarity with the elastic plasticity of Antonio Gaudi’s modernista architecture, avant-garde Catalan painting (1912–1930), which was inspired by the French; the distinctive mark of their own Miró (and later Dali); and promotion by the ADLAN group. ADLAN held exhibitions of work by Catalan surrealists Jaume Sans, Ramon Marinello, and Eudald Serra, among others, in addition to members of the international avant-garde. In this way Barcelona was exposed to fashionable

16. Ibid., 160.
17. While in Paris in 1933, Dali, in an article for Minotaure, likened modernista (Catalan bourgeois) architecture to surrealism. He described the organic, “edible,” sculptural forms as premonitions of the ravenous, horrific images of surrealism.
18. ADLAN stands for Amics de l’Art Nou. It was founded in 1932 by Joan Prats, Edvard Monteny, and David Planes (the latter two soon replaced by Joachim Gomis and Josep Lluís Sert) to promote Catalan avant-garde art, especially that of Miró. The organization thereby fostered a regional surrealist movement.
trends in modern painting and sculpture, including the capricious mobiles, stabiles, and prints of maverick American artist Alexander Calder. As a participant in this rich esthetic atmosphere, Capdevila (figs. 1 and 2) was profoundly influenced by Arp, whose work he probably viewed in the 1935 exhibition at the Roca jewelry shop in Barcelona. Prior to that, in 1926, Capdevila had studied painting in Paris and was impressed by the jewelry of René Lalique and Raymond Templer.19

Oddly enough, although Paris was the epicenter of surrealism, the great French jewelry houses such as Cartier, Boucheron, and Van Cleef & Arpels did not offer much pioneering surrealist jewelry, leaving that mode of jewelry design to independent fine artists. Beginning in the 1930s and burgeoning in the next three decades, several painters and sculptors, motivated by the desire to add jewelry to their repertoire, designed pieces to be fabricated by skilled artisans. One of these symbiotic relationships grew between surrealist Max Ernst and goldsmith François Hugo (grandson of Victor Hugo).20 Two of Ernst’s signature motifs—the bird and the visage—were borrowed by him for use as pendants and are almost identical with parallel motifs in his bronze sculptures. Grande Tête (fig. 4), carved by him in plaster and then cast by Hugo in gold, is analogous to a head in the upper right of his monumental bronze sculpture Capricorn (1948).

European contributions notwithstanding, one must always remember that surrealist jewelry was nowhere so strongly manifested as it was in the United States. In Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage, William Rubin discusses how these two revolutionary philosophies influenced much of the painting and sculpture that succeeded them, especially in America. Although abstract expressionism eventually eclipsed surrealism, Jackson Pollack, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, William Baziotes, and Clyfford Still could not have developed in the same manner had it not been for Arp and Miró. “[I]n its surrealizing phase of the early and mid-forties, American painting often exploited biomorphism. [However d]uring the fifties, when mature styles were making their mark, many American artists were reluctant to exhibit their earlier surrealizing works.”21 This ultimate rejection of surrealism by painters and sculptors by the end of the Second World War was not the case in the applied arts. Some of the richest and most expressive American jewelry of the thirties, forties, and fifties used surrealism as a jumping-off place. There were several reasons for this, one of the most significant being encouragement by the art establishment for avant-garde jewelry in general. For example, in 1946 the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted Modern Jewelry Design, which exhibited, in tandem, jewelry by painters, sculptors, and artist/craftspeople working in a myriad of modernist styles, not the least of which was surrealism. In the company of jewelry by such stellar personalities as Jacques Lipchitz, Alexander Calder, and Richard Pousette-Dart were found four neckpieces by textile artist Anni Albers in collaboration with Alex Reed, her student at Black Mountain College.22 Josef Albers, Anni’s husband, also

20. François Hugo fabricated jewelry for many fine artists including Pablo Picasso, André Derain, and Jean Cocteau.
22. In existence from 1933–1957, Black Mountain College, located near Asheville, North Carolina, featured an experimental curriculum revolving around the visual, literary, and performing arts. It benefited from many gifted artist/teachers who were refugees from war-torn Europe, one of whom was Josef Albers. Under his leadership, the school became spiritual heir to, and center for, the transmission of Bauhaus ideology.
taught there and was, actually, the presiding pundit at the school. In his design course, Albers emphasized construction and the correlation between form and media. In addition, Albers was interested in how form offsets the appearance and behavior of substances. Through placement and proportion, students sought to alter, disguise, or enhance the appearance of materials. They learned that visually a pebble is as valuable as a diamond and demonstrated that there is no hegemony among objects. In keeping with this ideology, in 1941 Anni Albers and Alex Reed designed jewelry made from hardware such as strainers, paper clips (fig. 6), screws, colored jacks, and L-braces. This jewelry was in conformity with the surrealist object, which depends upon displacement of disparate elements in atypical surroundings for effect. In describing the surrealist object, Sarane Alexandrian wrote: “It is a humble, familiar object, that by some caprice of desire is given a sumptuous appearance.” A good example is Meret Oppenheim’s 1936 Fur-lined Teacup, Saucer and Spoon. Oppenheim regarded jewelry in a similar vein. She is shown in a photograph by Man Ray (ca. 1950), wearing a pair of earrings consisting of two champagne corks. In an earlier photo by Man Ray (1918), Mina Loy sports a thermometer hanging from each ear. The dada-surrealist appropriation of vernacular objects extended to adapting them for use as accessories. “Fashion and its instruments [e.g., jewelry] were at the heart of the Surrealist metaphor, touching on the imagery of woman and the correlation between the real world of objects and the life of the mind.”

Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, boasted a resident artist, Harry Bertoia, who like Anni Albers at Black Mountain College created surrealist-inspired jewelry, but of a different sensibility. Bertoia, who ran the metals studio from 1937 to 1943, forged brooches and pendants that hinted at secret life forms (fig. 5, right). The pieces are deliberately ambiguous, like the paintings and reliefs of Arp, or especially the delicate, floating shapes of Paul Klee. One does not know whether their origins are animal or vegetable.

24. Ibid., 79.
Bertoia showed his jewelry in the early 1940s with Alexander Calder, who utilized a similar approach. They were both represented in the 1946 jewelry exhibition at MOMA, the Alexander Girard Gallery in Detroit, and the Nierendorf Gallery in New York.

The 3 January 1942 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine published an article entitled “Surrealist Jeweler.” The subject of the essay was Sam Kramer, an eccentric Greenwich Village shop owner, who boasted of making “Fantastic Jewelry for People Who are Slightly Mad.” Creatures conjured up in subconscious fantasies were his favorite motifs (fig. 7). He deployed body parts like

28. The phrase is taken from Kramer’s own promotional flyer.
those seen in Miró’s paintings, displacing them in the manner of Picasso. Kramer, furthermore, explored collage like the German dada group, only with materials suitable for jewelry—combining a variety of metals with oddly included stones and/or found objects, such as cowrie shells, reef coral, or even glass taxidermy eyes. The latter was a favorite theme of Kramer’s, as “the eye could achieve independence from the rest of the body and venture into the imagination as both object and subject. Sometimes severed, occasionally cyclopic (fig. 5, left), perversely propped up or injured by the presence of a crutch (fig. 8), the eye was both seeing and seen.”

Kramer’s studio/shop was as bizarre as he was; a veritable surreal nightmare. A neon protozoan blinked in his window, while the doorknob was cast in the form of a bronze hand which, in wintertime, would sport a pigskin glove. This outrageous space, promising “things to titillate the damnest [sic] ego—utter weirdities conceived in moments of semi-madness,” had a precedent in Elsa Schiaparelli’s stores—in London (opened 1934), noteworthy for its surrealist “tricks”; and in Paris (opened 1936), which featured Dalí’s shocking-pink bear with drawers in its torso, perched upon his Mae West Lips sofa.

Sam Kramer’s neighbor in the Village was jeweler Art Smith. His African-American heritage, sense of the theatrical, and profound biomorphic esthetic combined to produce dramatic surrealist jewelry. His Lava bracelet (fig. 9) is exceedingly large, covering almost the entire forearm when worn. It consists

of two contorting ameboid shapes, straining against one another. Smith uses two different-colored metals—copper and brass—for each unit; and a deep oxidation on the lower portion serves to intensify the sense of separation between the entities. Thus the bracelet seems almost alive and is, in the best sense of the term, a great surrealist joke.

Surrealism in jewelry design was represented on the West Coast as well. Northern Californian Margaret de Patta was best known for her reductivist work, a result of her study circa 1940–1941 with Hungarian constructivist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy at the School of Design in Chicago (New Bauhaus). However, Moholy-Nagy exposed his students to biomorphism also, as can be seen in several photographs from his book Vision in Motion (Chicago: Paul Theobold and Company, 1969). The real genius of de Patta’s jewelry lay in its successfully uniting artistic disciplines normally considered opposites: rigorous structuring through planned use of the line, light, and color of constructivism; and the spontaneous organic fantasy of surrealism (fig. 10).  

Although the United States harbored many more jewelers who flirted from time to time with surrealism—including Ed Wiener (fig. 11) and Hurst & Kingsbury in New York, and Peter Macchiarini (fig. 13) and Franz Bergman (fig. 12) in San Francisco—one last jeweler especially worth noting, because of yet another variation, was Earl Pardon. His “tribal” figures (fig. 14) seem to derive from the paintings of surrealist sympathizer Paul Klee, as well as Cuban surrealist Wilfredo Lam. The latter, a rather tardy entrant (mid-1940s) on the surrealist scene, employed a hybrid primitive/ethnic iconography reminiscent of Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon.32

All in all, surrealist morphology was endemic to jewelry as well as to painting and sculpture. Appropriation of illusionistic, biomorphic, and “readymade” imagery by artists working in, or designing for, metal was a natural progression from the more monumental works. Over the years, it has become apparent that biomorphism had the most prodigious effect. This was a logical development, due to its fluid grace, its links with art nouveau, and its inherently unlimited possibilities, which had the potential to challenge jewelry’s requirements. Furthermore, although biomorphism in painting initiated a new vocabulary of forms, it did not, like cubism, redefine the picture plane or redistribute spatial relationships. It was about shape alone, lending itself perfectly to the extrapolation and reinterpretation of so-called “decorative” elements in painting and sculpture, which, after all, is consistent with jewelry’s role as embellishment. Surrealist jewelry was an exuberant style and one that continues to ignite ideas in jewelry artists, even to this day. □

32. Rubin, Dada, 171.